

# 2004-2005

## WATERFOWL HABITAT AND HUNTING SEASON SUMMARY

### IOWA

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#### 2004-05 SEASON DATES AND REGULATIONS

For the purpose of setting waterfowl hunting regulations, Iowa is divided into north and south zones. The boundary between the duck hunting zones is a line beginning on the Nebraska-Iowa border at State Hwy. 175, running east along State Hwy. 175 to State Hwy. 37, then southeast along State Hwy. 37 to U.S. Hwy. 59, then south along U.S. Hwy. 59 to Interstate 80, and then along Interstate 80 east to the Iowa-Illinois border. The boundary between the goose hunting zones is line running along U.S. Highway 20.

	North Zone	South Zone
<b>Ducks, Mergansers &amp; Coots</b> (60-day season)	<b>Sept. 18 - 22</b> <b>Oct. 16 - Dec. 9</b>	<b>Sept. 25 - 26</b> <b>Oct. 16 - Dec. 12</b>
<b>Pintails</b> (30-day season)	<b>Sept. 18 - 22</b> <b>Oct. 16 - Nov. 9</b>	<b>Sept. 25 - 26</b> <b>Oct. 16 - Nov. 12</b>
<b>Canvasbacks</b> (30-day season)	<b>Oct. 23 - Nov. 21</b>	<b>Oct. 23 - Nov. 21</b>
<b>Canada Geese, Special Seasons</b>	<b>Sept. 11-12</b> <b>Sept. 1-15</b> (in Des Moines & Cedar Rapids Zones only)	<b>closed</b>
<b>Canada Geese &amp; Brant</b> (60-day season)	<b>Sept. 25 - Oct. 3</b> <b>Oct. 16 - Dec. 5</b>	<b>Oct. 2 - 10</b> <b>Oct. 30 - Dec. 19</b>
<b>White-fronted Geese</b> (86-day season)	<b>Sept. 25 - Dec. 19</b>	<b>Oct. 2 - Dec. 26</b>
	<b>Statewide</b>	
<b>Youth Waterfowl Hunting Day</b>	<b>Oct. 2 - 3</b>	<b>Oct. 9 - 10</b>
<b>Light Geese</b> (107-day season)	<b>Sept. 25 - Jan. 9, 2005</b>	
<b>Light Goose Conservation Order</b>	<b>Jan. 10 - April 15, 2005<sup>a</sup></b>	

**Shooting Hours:** ½ hour before sunrise to sunset.

#### **Daily Limits:**

**Ducks:** Daily limit is 6, including no more than 4 mallards (of which no more than 2 may be female), 2 wood ducks, 2 redheads, 3 scaup, 1 black duck, 1 canvasback, and 1 pintail.

**Mergansers:** Daily limit is 5, including no more than 1 hooded merganser.

**Coots:** Daily limit is 15.

**Geese:** Daily limit is 2 Canada geese, 2 white-fronted geese, 2 brant, and 20 snow geese, except during the special September Canada goose season in the Des Moines and Cedar Rapids zones when the bag limit is 3 Canada geese.

**Possession limits** are twice the daily bag limit, except there is no possession limit for light geese.

<sup>a</sup> In addition to the usual methods of take permitted for light goose hunting, hunters may use electronic calls and unplugged guns and can hunt until ½ hour after sunset during this period.

## Weather, Habitat And Waterfowl Populations

### Breeding Habitat and Waterfowl Populations:

Similar to the winter of 2002-2003, the winter of 2003-2004 was milder than normal. Wetland conditions were variable but generally poor in Iowa's portion of the prairie pothole region (PPR) during April and May of 2004. After May 21, several storms filled wetlands in northern Iowa to overflowing, particularly in the eastern half of the PPR. May precipitation was 2-5 inches above average and, as of June 1, precipitation in NW and North-central IA was 3-6 inches above normal for the first 5 months of the year. Duck breeding pair numbers were lower than average due to the dry conditions earlier in the spring, but the late May rains should have encouraged reneesting and undoubtedly produced good brood habitat. Duck production was below average as most pairs had

moved north before the habitat conditions improved. Goose production was better than average because most nests hatched prior to the flooding in late May. Trumpeter swans suffered some nest losses because of the late May flooding.

Budget constraints prevented conducting the statewide aerial goose survey in 2004. DNR wildlife biologists, however, made their annual goose population estimates, as they have since 1965. The estimated numbers of adult geese in Iowa's spring population increased 5%, from 54,200 in 2003 to 57,000 (uncorrected). The estimated numbers of young produced in 2004 (~ 40,000), however, was almost 10% higher than 2003, indicating the birds had a good production year.

Wood duck and Canada goose banding efforts in 2004 were similar to recent years (Table 1).

Table 1. Ducks and geese banded in Iowa

	2004	2003	2002
Wood Ducks	3264	4048	3146
Canada Geese	4312	4066	3480
Trumpeter Swan	91	88	68
Translocated geese	1090	1805	1292

#### Fall and Winter Habitat:

Following a summer that was cooler than normal with near average precipitation, wetland habitat conditions across much of Iowa were better than they had been in recent years, the exception being the northwest quarter of the state. The situation changed when a series of thunderstorms dropped 6-14 inches of rain in some areas in northwest and northcentral Iowa the week of Sept. 13-22. Many wetlands that had revegetated in 2003 were brim full, creating excellent habitat. Even though very dry weather prevailed over most of eastern and southern Iowa in September, above normal precipitation in August helped create good wetland habitat on many waterfowl areas for the opening day, the notable exceptions being Coralville and Odessa. Water levels on most pools of the Mississippi River were lower than desirable. .

October started out cooler than normal but warmed up during the later half. The first widespread freeze occurred on Oct. 2, when temperatures dropped into the 20's in northwest Iowa and into the lower 30's in the southeast. This was followed by additional freezes on Oct. 5 and 17, when temperatures fell to 22-25° F in numerous locations in northern Iowa. Precipitation was highly variable with the western half of the state remaining dry and the southeastern quarter being wetter than normal. Snow was recorded at several stations in northern Iowa on Oct. 16. The relatively dry weather allowed crop harvests to proceed at a good pace until about the last 10 days of the month in much of the state.

Mild weather was the rule for much of November; temperatures averaged 4.8° F above normal. Precipitation was near normal for most of the state, the exception being the west-central region where heavy rains fell the first of the month. The season's first accumulating snow fell across southeastern Iowa on the 24<sup>th</sup>. One to two inches of snow fell across northern Iowa on the 27<sup>th</sup> and over the southern half of the state on the 28<sup>th</sup>. Wetland habitats on most waterfowl areas remained in good condition throughout most of the months of October and November. Ice first formed on smaller wetlands on Nov. 11-12 in northern Iowa, which is late for this region. Ice again began forming in earnest on northern Iowa wetlands over the Thanksgiving holiday (Nov. 25-26) and persisted on some

areas through the first few days of December when warmer than normal weather thawed most wetlands out again.

Above normal temperatures were the rule for the first 12 days of December. Subzero temperatures did not hit the state until Dec. 19 and then really set in just before Christmas (Dec. 23) when high temperatures at many locations in northern Iowa did not break 0° F. By the 30<sup>th</sup>, however, temperatures again soared back into the 50's and 60's, which melted the little snow that had fallen on Dec. 20-21. The landscape only stayed snow free for a short time, however, as another winter storm deposited 6-15 inches of snow in many parts of the state on Jan. 4-5, just in time for the Midwinter survey.

Crop harvests lagged a little behind average in some parts of Iowa during 2004, but most notably in the eastern half. The mild dry weather in October allowed farmers to make up for lost time and soybean harvest was completed on schedule during the last week of October. The corn came out slower than usual in 2004; by end of October 62% of the corn had been harvested compared to a 5-year average of 82%. Mild weather in November enabled the corn harvest, and subsequent fall tillage, to be completed in a timely manner.

In contrast to last year, which was Iowa's driest year since 1989, many of the wetlands in the state, especially those in the northcentral and northwest regions, were in very good condition throughout the fall and going into the winter. This bodes well for duck and goose production in 2005 as these regions host the highest densities of breeding waterfowl in the state.

### **Waterfowl Migrations And Hunting**

Despite August and September rains that helped create some good habitat in many parts of the state, early September teal and wood duck migrations appeared to be lighter than usual in many regions, the exception being southeast Iowa. Hunting pressure on the first opening weekend in the north zone seemed to be lighter than normal, although hunters may have just spread out to take advantage of the wet conditions due to the September rains. The ducks certainly seemed to do this, as opening weekend success was more highly variable than usual. Some hunters shot limits while others only fired a shot or two. Overall success appeared to be poorer than average in most areas, the exceptions being the Ruthven, Spirit Lake and Black Hawk Lake areas, where success was reported to be good to excellent. Blue-wings and wood ducks comprised the majority of the harvest, with above average numbers of pintails and wigeon being taken as well. Hunting pressure appeared to be average for the opening weekend in the south zone, with success ranging from fair to good. Wood ducks dominated the bag in the south zone, although there were better than average numbers of teal associated with the Mississippi River. A lack of weather fronts during the first splits resulted in few birds moving through the state during these seasons. With the first real freeze delayed until Oct. 2, the blue-wings essentially trickled through the state in a leisurely manner.

Canada goose hunting got underway in the north zone with the opening of a 2-day special season on Sept. 11-12. Hunting pressure appeared to be lower than during the 2-day seasons in 1996-2000 and success ranged from fair to poor on the first day, but improved on day two in some areas. As was done in 2002 and 2003, a September 1-15 Canada goose season was opened in zones around Des Moines and Iowa City/Cedar Rapids. Hunting pressure and success in these zones appeared to be similar to previous years, although some hunters thought there were fewer geese in the Cedar Rapids area than previous years.

In keeping with a trend that has been developing in recent years, few small Canada geese moved into Iowa before Oct. 1. Consequently, few migrant geese were on hand for the September 25<sup>th</sup> opener in the north zone and hunting success was reported as only fair as the resident geese seemed to be well educated. Some of the best success was reported by hunters pursuing urban flocks. Hunting pressure during the first two weeks of the Canada goose season in this zone, traditionally the heaviest harvest period, again appeared to be lighter than usual. The lack of hunting pressure and success may have been due to the lagging crop harvests, the lack of migrant geese, and the lack of resident geese outside urban areas. In the south zone, the hunting pressure for the Canada goose opener appeared to be similar to past years and success was about average. The lagging migration of small Canada geese may have reduced harvest opportunities along the Mississippi River, a traditional early October harvest area in the south zone.

There were no notable migrations of ducks into the state during the first half of October even though cold fronts pushed temperatures into the low 30's and 20's on several occasions. Nevertheless, hunters venturing forth for the second opener of the duck season (same day in both zones) found a few more green-wings, pintails, wigeon, gadwalls, and shovelers had trickled in during the first 2 weeks of the month. Overall, both duck and hunter numbers appeared to be lower on many areas compared to the first opener. Again, success was highly variable but was generally only fair on most areas.

The most notable migration of the fall, particularly in the eastern half of the Iowa, occurred on the opening weekend of the pheasant season (Oct. 30). A storm system that brought rain and strong west-northwest winds to Iowa pushed good numbers of mid-season migrants (gadwall, wigeon, green-wings, shovelers, divers and a few mallards) through the state between Oct. 30 and Nov. 2. Despite good wetland habitat conditions on many areas, these birds did not linger long. Divers rode these winds to Pools 7-12 on the Mississippi River as their numbers mushroomed to nearly 200,000 on the Iowa pools during the first week of November (150,000 cans, 30,000 scaup, 20,000 ringnecks). The few white-fronts noted migrating this season also moved across the state during the last week of October and the first week of November.

The mild weather that prevailed throughout most of November did little to move ducks into the state. The few weather systems that did pass over the state most often developed to the southwest and did not bring with them the strong west-northwest winds that were needed to push substantial numbers of ducks into the center or eastern regions of the state. The cold temperatures that put short-lived skim ice on some smaller wetlands in the northern Iowa on Nov. 11-12 only produced a trickle of migrating ducks. Weak weather fronts brought a few more ducks and 2,500 snow geese to the state the third week of the month. The largest concentration of snow geese, however, occurred at the Bays Branch Wildlife Area, about 80 miles east of the traditional staging areas along the Missouri River. On Nov. 20, a cold front with strong northwest winds carried a few more greenwings, gadwalls, and divers into the state, most noticeable in the western third, but the numbers of ducks, particularly mallards, seen moving were disappointing low on most areas. Despite a noticeable migration, hunting success ranged from fair to poor.

It wasn't until the last week of November that freezing temperatures finally settled into Iowa. Many wetlands in North Dakota and Minnesota became ice-covered for the season. The ice that formed on most of the shallow wetlands across the state over Thanksgiving weekend helped to consolidate the scattered ducks but also encouraged most of the dabbling ducks, except mallards, to head south. By Dec. 1, all but the very largest lakes in the northern half of the state had a substantial ice cover and ice had formed on ponds to the Missouri border. Unlike 2003 when this event produced a nice migration,

the numbers of ducks moving as wetlands froze up for the year was just a trickle and hunting success over the Thanksgiving weekend was fair at best, and poor in many locations. As the backwaters of the upper Mississippi became ice-covered, many diving ducks moved down to Pool 19 near Keokuk on the last day of the month. Substantial numbers of snow geese were also noted moving along the Missouri River during the last week of November, but few stopped at the refuges and those that did only stayed a day or two.

Similar to 2003, above average temperatures prevailed during the first half of December. The unseasonably warm weather opened up most wetlands by the 10th but did little to improve late season duck hunting prospects. Cold weather in states to the north, along with a light north wind, reportedly pushed a few mallards onto some of the southern areas in the state the last weekend of the season (Dec. 11-12). Hunting pressure was light by then as the deer seasons were open, but the few hunters out reported fair to good success.

As has been the pattern for the past few years, Canada goose numbers on most refuges increased gradually throughout October, mostly due to influxes of small Canadas and returning molt-migrant giants. Numbers of geese nearly doubled on surveyed areas during the first 10 days of November and increased again during the last week of the month. This pattern was similar to 2003, when the largest increases in Canada goose numbers occurred during the last 3 weeks of November. Over-water Canada goose hunters had only fair success during most of October and November as there were no substantial migrations during these periods. Field hunters fared somewhat better as they pursued field-feeding birds associated with urban areas and refuges. The warm weather and lack of snow cover made goose hunting more challenging than usual in November and December. The numbers of Canada geese counted during the mid-December survey (170,360) was similar to numbers seen in the previous 3 years but markedly different from the average of 72,000 observed in the 1990's (Table 2). Although the weather cooled substantially as Christmas approached, there was little snow cover; most of the northern counties had only 1-2 inches of snow on the ground. December 2004 had the 9<sup>th</sup> lowest snow total in 118 years. As a result, most of the Canada geese did not migrate south and about 150,000 remained in Iowa for the Midwinter Survey (Jan 3-7), well above the average of 50,000 seen in the 1990's.

In contrast to Canada geese, whose numbers have been increasing in recent years, snow geese have all but abandoned the state. Snow goose numbers peaked at 3,000 this past fall, with 2,500 of these birds being found 80 miles east of traditional refuges along the Missouri River. Numbers of snow geese at Desoto NWR peaked at only 120 birds on Nov. 24. In 2003, snow geese peaked at 170,000 during the first week of December; in 2002 their numbers peaked at only 6,000 during the first week of November. All of these counts contrast sharply with the 1990's when numbers of snow geese using refuges in Iowa's Missouri River valley often exceeded 500,000 and Desoto typically held at 300,000 birds. Snow goose hunting was virtually nonexistent this past fall. The snow goose harvest will be lucky to exceed the low of 600 taken during the 2000 regular season.

### **Hunting Season Overview**

The most frequently voiced comment regarding the 2004 duck season has been that it was one of the worst seasons in memory, if not the worst. Whether that opinion will be reflected in the harvest is yet to be seen. The harvest, although likely to be lower than in recent years, will not likely be as low as it was in 1962 (when 45,000 ducks were shot in IA) or 1988 (when the harvest was 78,000). Those seasons, however, were 25 and 30-day seasons, respectively, with 2 and 3 bird bag limits, not 60 days long. Iowa's 2004 duck harvest will undoubtedly be below the average for the previous 60-day

seasons, despite what appeared to be better than average habitat conditions in many parts of the state. If the perceptions of the harvest during the first split of the duck season and the second opener hold true for the majority of the hunters, the harvest for the 2004 season could be very low because 50% of the ducks are usually harvested during the first 14 days of the season.

Although a special 2-day September Canada goose season was opened in the north goose hunting zone in 2004, the additional harvest resulting from this season may not have offset the harvest lost as a result of the regular Canada goose season being shortened by 10 days. A trickle of a migration during October and November did not create many good hunting opportunities during the majority of the season. The mild weather that prevailed during the first half of December also reduced the harvest opportunities at a time when winter weather usually makes the birds more vulnerable. The Canada goose harvest will likely be lower than in 2003.

Light goose hunting was all but nonexistent in 2004. The few light geese that did stop were not even in the Missouri River valley where hunters have a tradition of pursuing them. The 2004 light goose harvest may be a record low.

### Disease Events

There were no significant disease outbreaks on areas managed by the IA DNR in 2004.

Table 2. Results of special goose surveys conducted in Iowa.

		Canada Geese			Snow Geese
Year	Date	Large	Small	Total	
Mid-October Survey					
2000	18-Oct	67,998	13,753	81,751	242
2001	17-Oct	56,111	9,787	65,898	6
2002	16-Oct	60,150	12,740	72,890	81
2003	15-Oct	54,000	7,800	61,800	23
2004	Discontinued	---	---	---	---
Mid-December Survey					
2000	14-Dec	77,119	3,475	80,594	0
2001	13-Dec	131,667	22,130	153,797	136,341
2002	12-Dec	147,958	18,116	166,073	80,114
2003	10-Dec	188,379	8,606	196,985	31,506
2004	15-Dec	154,842	15,068	170,360	394
Midwinter Survey					
2001	3-Jan	29,776	264	30,040	0
2002	9-Jan	229,192	10,122	239,314	261
2003	8-Jan	195,367	9,501	204,868	20,070
2004	7-Jan	165,498	2,173	168,821	42
2005	5-Jan	142,599	3,650	146,249	13